



The Fibreoptic Industry Association

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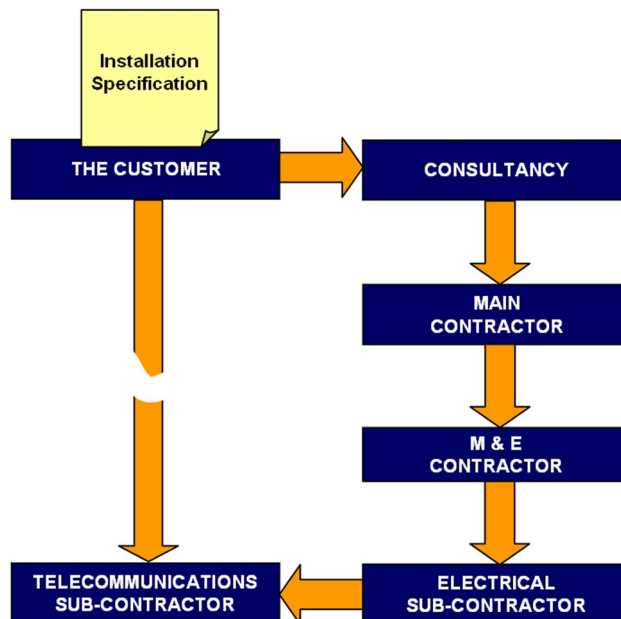
THE CHANGING FACE OF INFRASTRUCTURE CONSULTANCY

AND TAKING STEPS TO COMBAT IT

It is often said that there are two clear signs that an industry is in decline - the first is when suppliers begin to make more money out of patent claims than they do from production, the second is when the ranks of consultants begin to be swelled by those laid off by suppliers.

These two are certainly established and endemic in the telecommunications infrastructure industry, both for copper and optical fibre cabling. However, there is a third, rather depressing, trend that seems to be becoming increasingly prevalent - the immersion of telecommunications infrastructure within tenders covering other services such as electrical and plumbing works. This could be said to be a natural result of increasing standardisation and the relative dormancy of that standardisation within the cabling industry, breeding familiarity with the terms associated with the industry. Moreover, it could be said that the incorporation of telecommunications infrastructure within wider mechanical and electrical contracts is exactly what was proposed so many years ago by the proponents of structured cabling - "telecommunications - the fourth utility".

Whatever the reason, it is becoming increasingly common to find that the detailed technical specification for the IT cabling within a project is now buried within a much larger contract. This in turn is being handled by consultancy organisations that are much less specialised than in the "good old days" and we are seeing the advent of the consultant as a barrier between the client and the supplier, not accidentally but intentionally, and who are quite happy to issue tenders containing substantial technical errors - leaving their resolution to the unfortunate tenderers. In fact, there are some so-called consultants who feel perfectly justified in taking these stances and are clearly quite proud of the fact.



The multi-tier subcontract chain – a high risk strategy

In a recent tender document issued by just such an organisation contained a total of fifteen standards quoted to which the installation had to conform. Of those fifteen, thirteen were either obsolete, were irrelevant or conflicted with each other. In the end all that could be determined was that the installation had to comply with the 16th edition of the Wiring Regulations (BS 7671) and had to have specific pin-out at the outlets. Such a lack of clarity is often compounded by the fact that there are frequently so many tiers of sub-contract above the “datacomms” installer that the installer never sees the original specification and scope-of-work. As a result work commences and can be well advanced before the client actually sees the state of the project - by which time it is often too late to rescue the situation in any economically viable manner.

We are therefore seeing installations that are functional but not maintainable or repairable. The cost of auditing such installations and attempting to find resolutions to the problems created can, in some cases, be higher than that of the initial installation - and these costs are chicken-feed when compared to the cost of litigation. There are really only two losers in this situation - the client and the “cabling installer”. The former gets an unsatisfactory installation while the latter faces costs which are usually inflated by all those involved in the subcontract tier stack, including of course, the consultants themselves.

In the face of this, the Fibreoptic Industry Association have to have a strategy to combat or at least assist their members and, in turn, their clients.

The FIA Arbitration Service has been created to provide technical advice and support where there is a dispute relating to the work or services provided by a Member. A decision to use the Arbitration Service requires prior agreement by both parties involved that they will accept the final arbitration. The process is managed by the Arbitration Committee and supported, where necessary, by two independent arbiters and chaired by the Technical Director of the FIA.

In contrast to the FIA's Arbitration Service, the FIA Audit Scheme is a technical rather than contractual service. The FIA Audit Scheme is able to provide independent verification of specification compliance for those products and services supplied by FIA members to other FIA members as well as external organizations. The assessment of compliance will be undertaken by independent personnel under FIA instruction and using agreed UK, United States, European or international standards, specifications and/or codes of practice. The Audit Scheme is managed by the Audit Committee which is chaired by the FIA's Technical Director.

Both the Arbitration Service and the Audit Scheme has been operating for many years and are sometimes employed even when the installation has been correctly specified. The growth in poorly specified projects described above has led to an even more comprehensive project – the updating of the FIA Approved Installer Scheme. From the end of Q1, 2006, members of the FIA will be encouraged to become Approved Installers by committing to, and using, a quality assurance system specially developed by the FIA Council which will provide the installer and their client with significantly enhanced levels of contractual protection.

If you wish to access the resources provided by the FIA go to www.fia-online.co.uk. Enquiries can be e-mailed to jane@fiasec.demon.co.uk or, alternatively, you can contact the FIA Secretariat in 01763 273039.